
SCIENCE AND ART IN SOCIAL WORK: AN OLD QUESTION IN THE MODERN ARMENIAN CONTEXT

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The exact nature of social work has been the subject of debate in recent decades. As social work has gained recognition as a profession, social workers, and vested interests have begun to question whether the field is one best defined as a science or an art. This question is undoubtedly a powerful one: distinct theories, models, and applications of social work have been adopted based on the answer, often greatly influencing the direction of social work's development.

Especially in the context of a nation like Armenia, where the practice of social work is relatively new, it is important to recognize that the nature of social work is both time and location specific. This helps to explain the fact that, although the science-or-art question has been answered countless times, the answers have differed depending on time and location. In the region and Armenia, in particular, the context of the science-or-art question is one wherein the notion of science is binary, either something is a science or it is not. This differs from the more integrative, interdisciplinary nature of science described in Western insights. Western views of the nature of science provide a space for the fast development and acceptance of new, non-traditional sciences while the Armenian view does not so readily make room for new types or functions of science.

Today, Armenian social work is experiencing increased recognition and celebration. Even state social services with bureaucratic traditions have begun to employ social workers and promote social work techniques through governmental case management institutes. In accordance, debates focusing on the necessity of social work have become obsolete. In light of this, it is timely to discuss developments of the profession. Of course, this leads to more and more questions: How, in what directions, and according to which theories, should the profession develop? Who will manage cases? Will evidence-based practice, the scientific basis of social work, be employed? Whose intuitive, creative work will be considered legitimate, reasonable, or rational and in which circumstances?

Currently, these questions bear troubling results; there are no case managers trained in evidence-based practices, nor a scientific basis from which we may choose to trust or not trust a social worker's intuitive, creative work. This means that social work practice is in chaos, which is natural considering the country's soviet and post-soviet heritage. However, an intensive search for solutions is as logical and natural as the chaos which necessitates it. Therefore, this article attempts to synthesize global debates on the science-or-art question and, from this background, predict possible ways social work may develop in Armenia.

With modern definitions of social work found everywhere from school text-

books to agency mandates and with diverse cultures each developing and performing social work in unique ways, it is helpful to begin by examining a definition of social work which is globally accepted. With over 90 member organizations, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is considered the preeminent global representative of social work and social workers. Accepted and ratified during the 2000 General Meeting, IFSW defines the profession as one that “promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being”¹

In regards to the science-or-art question, the IFSW definition recognizes that social work is composed of a complex, “interrelated system of values, theory and practice” that “bases its methodology on a systematic body of evidence-based knowledge derived from research and practice evaluation”². The term “evidence-based” describes the practice of social work with a strong grounding in and reliance on research. Accordingly, it can be stated that today the global community of social workers views social work, at least partially, as a scientific pursuit.

As a rule, it can be said that in North America (particularly in the USA and Canada), specialists tend to emphasize the scientific basis of social work (individualized, science-based casework). However, European social work seems to have effectively straddled the line between art and science, developing a form of social work that is more comprehensive and collectivist than that seen in North America³.

It becomes useful, then, to examine where this drive for a science-based profession stems from. For many models of social work, it arises from American Abraham Flexner’s 1915 paper titled *Is Social Work a Profession*. This paper was profoundly influential on the future of social work in North America and, due to the influence of North American social work models, on social work globally. Flexner argued that while the source of social work material is “obviously from science and learning”, social work still borrowed too much of this science and learning from other disciplines to be considered a profession in its own right.

Since attaining professional status was seen within the field of social work (as it was and continues to be in most fields) to be highly desirable, Flexner’s report was, as Barbara White describes it, the “impetus for social work to... self-consciously examine itself.”⁴ Consequently, Flexner’s report and social work’s subsequent self-examination led to a push for pure, social-work research and scientific inquiry that continues to this day. Jenna Benn notes that Flexner’s paper shifted social work’s focus to casework and other individual forms of social work which could be easily quantified in a scientific way, at the expense of social work’s less quantifiable forms⁵.

While other parts of the world were not so deeply influenced by Flexner’s report, the growing dominance of the neo-liberal paradigm in recent decades has

¹ <http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/>, 23.11.2014 23:20.

² <http://ifsw.org/policies/globalisation-and-the-environment/> 16.11.2014 15:45.

³ Russell, A new Paradigm of Social Work, NY, 2011.

⁴ White, B. (2008). *Comprehensive Handbook of Social Work and Social Welfare: The Profession of Social Work*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. p. 82.

⁵ Benn, J. (2006). *The Privatization of Social Work: A Deviation or a Logical Progression?* *Journal of Student Social Work*, 4., p. 55.

prompted a global trend towards bringing social work into line with neo-liberal policies. Given the nature of such policies, this trend aligns naturally with the Flexner-provoked push to establish social work as a science-based profession. For instance, Shaw, Arksey and Mullender argue that social work in the United Kingdom “has the potential to offer a distinctive and valued contribution to social science research”⁶ and Norwegian Edgar Marthinsen describes a similar “struggle for intellectual respectability” through an increase of science-based practice in Scandinavian professional social work⁷.

In some cases, the lack of science in social work has actually led to it being defined as an art, which does not bode well for the profession in the current neo-liberal context. As an art, social work is defined as a creative, intuitive, aesthetic practice with no need for a scientific foundation. Martinez-Brawley and Zorita note that the lack of scientific background in the field of social work is sometimes seen as proof that social work is an art, not a science. However, the authors note that this reasoning is circular, arguing that because science is not present to a great degree in social work, it cannot possibly be important or necessary for the profession. Martinez-Brawley and Zorita instead argue that the current lack of science in the field should be a reason to push for social work to become a more scientific field, rather than a reason to relegate the field to the realm of an art⁸.

In this vein, Edgar Marthinsen argues that the popular idea that social work lacks its own suitable scientific background stems from “the dominant epistemological view of how knowledge is diffused between science and professionals”⁹. He claims that social work does not lack a scientific background because it is art-based by nature, but because the profession, considered by the other social sciences as only an applied profession, has not been allowed the opportunity to develop a scientific basis. He further asserts that “around the world... we may rightfully claim that social work is a distinct social field” that is held back only by its lack of recognition within the social sciences. Thus, it can be argued that social work *is* already a science-based profession that is simply not recognized as such. Such arguments contend that social work fits well into today’s neo-liberal world.

Furthermore, a new direction in social work globally is rejecting the science-art binary, some argue that there is room for both science and art in the field. American Donna Dustin, for instance, argues that it is factually evident that social workers work within two different realms of rationality - science and art – and it must be acknowledged that alone, both realms have limitations. She also argues that the mediation of both realms is “by its very nature, a difficult task”¹⁰. Canadian David Austin further argues that, while science is a part of social work, the profession (like

⁶ Shaw, I., Arksey, H., & Mullender, A. (2005). Recognizing Social Work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 36, p. 243.

⁷ Marthinsen, E. (2011). Social work practice and social science history. *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, 15(1), p. 8.

⁸ Martinez-Brawley, E., & Zorita, P. (1998). At the Edge of the Frame: Beyond Science and Art in Social Work. *British Journal of Social Work*, p. 197-212.

⁹ Marthinsen, E. (2011). Social work practice and social science history. *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, 15(1), p. 10, 16.

¹⁰ Dustin, D. (2007). *The McDonaldization of social work: Social Work Practice in the Specialist Field of Care Management*. Aldershot, VT: Ashgate, p. 146.

all professions) has many elements and some of those elements “do not have distinctive professional characteristics”, nor should they be described as or be rationalized into being seen as scientifically-based¹¹. Therefore, Austin believes the social work field should not put so much time and effort into new forms of proving the field’s ‘scientific base’, such as the evidence-based practices described in IFSW’s definition of social work¹².

Klein and Bloom further assert that the art of using practice wisdom may be reframed as a way to fill in the gaps left from “the incomplete understanding that may result from previous empirical work”¹³. According to Molly Magill, the use of integrative practice and research models will neither “hinder the moment-by-moment artistry” of social work nor ignore the scientific basis of the field¹⁴. Their argument accepts the need for art in social work, without creating a conflict with the need for science. Instead, science can be seen as a way to increase transparency in the field and justify interventions and techniques.

To some, calls for integration are seen as a way to ‘save’ social work from being deemed either a pure science or a pure art. As a pure science, social work may lose an important connection with its clients and its mission, in general, focusing purely on enacting a medical-style model of problem solving. As a pure art, social work would lose valuable opportunities to learn from science and be informed by best practices in the field. In the context of social work in New Zealand, Kelly and Stanley argue that “bridging this gap” between science and art is “critical to the longevity” of social work and the prosperity of the field’s clients¹⁵. They believe that social workers must be critical of any dogmatism, and instead search for a middle ground. They warn that the thrust in New Zealand today (which can be felt globally) is towards neo-liberal policies that advocate for casework-style, individualized, micro approaches that allow for social work “practice without the need for critical or structural analysis”¹⁶. In line with this, Jennissen and Lundy worry that today “the voices of social workers are largely absent” in government policy, replaced by quantifiable, “economic indicators” to “determine the social welfare agenda”¹⁷. They argue that social workers’ wisdom and understanding is being replaced by purely scientific data.

McIver reminds us of a century-old argument, that social casework alone deals “with consequences but not with causes” while forgetting that “the consequences are eternal so long as the causes endure”¹⁸. With an integrated approach, it may be

¹¹ Austin, D. (1983). *The Flexner Myth And The History Of Social Work*. *Social Service Review*, p. 374.

¹² Austin, D. (1983). *The Flexner Myth And The History Of Social Work*. *Social Service Review*, p. 374.

¹³ Klein, W., & Bloom, M. (1995). *Practice Wisdom*. *Social Work*, 40(6), p. 806.

¹⁴ Magill, M. (2006). *The Future of Evidence in Evidence-based Practice: Who Will Answer the Call for Clinical Relevance?* *Journal of Social Work*, 6(2), p. 107.

¹⁵ Kelly, S., & Stanley, T. (2012). *Where Science Meets Art: Sociology and Social Work*. *Sociology Mind*, p. 335.

¹⁶ Kelly, S., & Stanley, T. (2012). *Where Science Meets Art: Sociology and Social Work*. *Sociology Mind*, p. 336.

¹⁷ Jennissen, T., & Lundy, C. (2011). *One hundred years of social work a history of the profession in English Canada, 1900-2000*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press. p. 292.

¹⁸ McIver, R. (1931). *Relation of sociology to social work*. (Textbook). p. 6.

possible for the social work field to continue to fix micro problems while simultaneously affecting macro, social policy issues in a way that respects both the art and the science of the field. This point of view stresses the idea that tools of logical empiricism (traditionally used in medical science and natural sciences) do neither ultimately nor cumulatively form comprehensive knowledge. Without such a view, even the comparatively collectivist, comprehensive view of social work held in Europe may be in jeopardy.

Globally, throughout the past two decades, such heated discussions over the science-or-art question have been sidelined by assertions from professional platforms in Western social work that social work is at a “breaking point” and “in crisis”¹⁹. In Europe and western societies, neo-liberal ideas have begun to dismantle universal welfare, leading to a “crisis” of social work identity at the systems level; no longer is the idea of fighting social problems at any cost considered noble and valuable. Furthermore, individual social work and services in western countries have turned traditional frameworks upside-down²⁰ and some authors have even declared social work “dead”, arguing that society no longer speaks in terms of “the right to welfare” but instead of “the right to receive services”²¹.

Globally, social work responded to the standardized, neo-liberal framework through the “life preserver” of case management methodology²². Case management is the scientific-methodological technique that connects “the artificial world of formal social interrogations and the real world”, so that this connection leads to a form of “care”²³. However, in post-soviet Armenia other realities contributed to this movement towards case management, including a lack of proper theoretical grounds and the influence of the apparent “impossibilities” of reality. Consequently, when the science-or-art question is asked today, it is commonly answered in line with the growing trend towards a neo-liberal framework in social work. Such answers argue that if self-accountability is given greater importance than social-accountability, individuals will experience social work by working directly with social workers to solve individual problems. This way of answering the science-or-art question also establishes a more organized, standardized, policy-based notion of social work at the structural level. Thus, both individualized care and the overarching structures of social welfare have been adapted to the rise of neo-liberalism.

In post-socialist, and particularly in post-soviet, countries, the modes of understanding social work are conditioned by the factors that “created” social work in these countries. Social work in Armenia began immediately after independence, a time when state social care was suddenly removed and there was neither time nor possibilities, nor resources, nor experience to establish new types of social care in a tempered, appropriate manner. The collapse of the Soviet Union after 70 years of rule left Armenians with no traditional mechanisms for the provision of social sup-

¹⁹ Bamford, T. (1990) *The Future of Social Work*, London, Macmillan Education Ltd. p. ix.

²⁰ Lesnik, B. (1997). *Change in social work*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Arena.

²¹ Payne M (2005) *Modern Social Work Theory*. London Palgrave, p. 26.

²² Moxley, D. (1989). *The practice of case management*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, p. 14-18.

²³ Folgheraiter, F. (2004). *Relational social work toward networking and societal practices*. London: Jessica Kingsley. p. 21.

port and triggered an economic crisis and a devastating 6-year war with neighbouring Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Armenia was faced with the overwhelming aftermath of the Spitak earthquake. With no supports in place, Armenia had no choice but to build the profession of social work from the ground up to respond to these crises. Consequently, the influence of outside models of social work from Europe and America outshined any attempts to establish a culturally and socially specific model.

At the beginning of the post-Soviet period, individuals were forced to rely only on their own natural social networks. The extreme levels of need at the time threatened the overuse and eventual collapse of these natural networks. Even after 20 years of independence, artificial or structured support can be found only as a non-fundamental, additional type of support. Alongside the natural support networks, social work developed suddenly and modeled after the case management, which was the main methodology brought to the country through foreign aid activities. This ideology has remained dominant until the present day and, to some degree, still remains a borrowed ideology. That is to say, the notions of case management and social work, in general, have not been fully applied or naturalized to Armenia's specific society.

Therefore, in contemporary Armenia, as paradoxical as it may seem, the social work field is, on the one hand, established and prospering and, on the other hand, in crisis since it missed the opportunity to develop theoretically in the absence of outside influence. This is a special kind of crisis that exists somewhere between the undeniable influence of Western social work models and the nostalgic memories of universal welfare under the paternalist, social state that existed before the countries shifted to their current, post-socialist state. Armenia is in transition; the old has not been fully forgotten while the new is not yet fully established.

It is not an overstatement to allege that currently social work in Armenia is more of an art than science since it is currently based on organized activities that rely on the personal revelations of practitioners. Although social work is becoming increasingly organized, the limited use of scientific research and methods in the field is profound. Social work activities in the country also rarely stem from highly organized models and structures. Still, the social worker is considered an expert, advisor, or a wise companion for people in need. Thus, while science attempts to inform the social work field with theories and general procedures that would help social workers' solve social problems, in Armenia, science is replaced by the "magical power" professionals possess. This paints a deeply worrying picture in which social workers, regardless of their intentions, may cause major harm to their clients and society as a whole.

The social idea of human intervention²⁴ relies inherently on the ability of direct or indirect social service providers. This means that Armenia, with its form of social work based almost solely on intuition and artistry, is an interesting case study for a type of social work that lacks a scientific basis. It is possible to see that, through trial-and-error and grasping-in-the-dark approaches to social work, some professionals are able to foster positive change through their individual or organizational

²⁴ Giddens, A. (1991). *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity. p. 102.

models of practice. Seeing this positive change, such professionals do not feel the need to base their practice in science. Regardless of their sometimes positive outcomes, there is still a need for science to provide theoretical grounds in order to make successes the non-arbitrary norm. Furthermore, since there are no studies on the effectiveness of social work, there are often overlaps between the natural social networks and supports and existing structural, professional forms of social work. Thus, science will play an important role in the efficacy of Armenian social work.

It is time to form a basis for scientific social work in Armenia. To reach such a state, the first step is to develop a scientific basis for Armenian social work. At the same time, scientific techniques and tools should be taught and developed in Armenia. Helping individuals, groups, and society, in general, should be something that social workers and other vested interests do from an evidence-based background. This does not negate the creative, artistic elements of social work practice in Armenia. On the contrary, the artistic side of social work should be celebrated and fostered while the need for scientific background and understanding are simultaneously recognized as important for a social worker to be a true professional. It is important to remember, as is the current trend in global social work, the place of art in the field because a social worker who uses science is only an expert on one side; the client is also an expert in their own issues. In a perfect situation, by meeting with clients throughout their career, professional social workers will inevitably develop practice wisdom, based on the mix of their educational and evidence-based background and the client's own expertise in their own life and experiences. This practice wisdom must also be given a space to influence the development of social work as a science. For instance, practice wisdom gained by professionals may guide future research and best practices in clinical and macro-level practice.

In line with this, social work in Armenia must find a solution that has a scientific basis while saving space for artistry in practice. This may even be framed as the establishment of a new, unique form of social work in the country; it may not be possible to change social work without destabilizing the current educational and practice systems. For instance, educational courses that focus on research and technical skills must be established and social work professionals must have the opportunity for continued learning trainings. For instance, some international organizations currently provide short-term trainings to transmit fundamental skills and techniques to social workers. Such efforts should be framed positively since they show recognition for the need to provide professionals with the skills to adequately act with clients from international perspectives. However, they do nothing to address the underlying lack of science in Armenian social work nor the need for society specific skills. While the exact methods are outside the scope of this article, it is clear that the social work field must find a solution that addresses the issue in a comprehensive, realistic way that also includes the underlying issues so that the future of social work has a strong basis. Only in this way will the status quo change and Armenia's social reality flourish.

Keywords: social work, science, art, profession, Armenian social work model

ՄԻՐԱ ԱՆՏՈՆՅԱՆ – Գիտությունը և արվեստը սոցիալական աշխատանքում. հին հարց ժամանակակից հայկական համատեքստում – Սոցիալական աշխատանքը որպես մասնագիտություն ճանաչվելուց ի վեր կասկածի տակ դրվեցին տարածված կարծիքները՝ արդյոք այդ դաշտը լավագույնս սահմանվում է որպես գիտություն, թե արվեստ: Հոդվածում ի մի են բերվում հարցի վերաբերյալ առկա փաստարկները՝ փորձելով հասկանալ Հայաստանում այդ վեճի ապագան: Ներկայումս Հայաստանում սոցիալական աշխատանքի մասնագիտությունը արդեն ճանաչված և ընդունված է լայնորեն, սակայն պրակտիկ գործունեության մեջ գիտական հենքերի բացակայությունը հանգեցրել է որոշակի ճգնաժամի: Հոդվածում մասնավորապես համոզմունք է հայտնվում, որ կրթության և հետազոտությունների զուգակցումն ու դրանց արմատավորումը պրակտիկայում այն ճանապարհն է, որը թույլ կտա առանց վնասելու մասնագիտության արդեն իսկ ձևավորված արվեստականությունն ու ստեղծագործականությունը, ապահովել սոցիալական իրականության հետագա զարգացումը:

Բանալի բառեր – *սոցիալական աշխատանք, գիտություն, արվեստ, մասնագիտություն, սոցիալական աշխատանքի հայկական մոդել*

МИРА АНТОНЯН – Наука и искусство в социальной работе: старый вопрос в современном армянском контексте. – После того как социальная работа получила признание как профессия, возник вопрос – что это, наука или искусство? Статья синтезирует глобальные дискуссии, затрагивающие спорный вопрос, и с этой точки зрения рассматривает будущее социальной работы в Армении. Сегодня социальная работа получила здесь признание. Тем не менее, ей ощутимо не хватает прочных научных основ. В статье, в частности, утверждается, что нашей стране нужна новая форма социальной работы, опирающаяся на науку, но не отрицающая интуиции и творческого подхода.

Ключевые слова: *социальная работа, наука, искусство, профессия, армянская модель социальной работы*